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NURSING IN MISSION STATIONS



EXCERPTS FROM A LETTER WRITTEN BY A MISSIONARY IN PORTO RICO, TO HER SISTER, A PUPIL-NURSE IN LEVERING HOSPITAL, HANNIBAL, MO.

CAGUAS, PORTO RICO, July, 1912.

MY DEAREST SISTER:

I have planned to tell you all we have learned about the plague during the last five weeks. It has been terribly hot here for three months, and it is unusually so now.

I had never known very much about the bubonic plague until it came to Porto Rico, except that it was very common in the Orient, and in South America, and parts of Africa. Only this last winter there was a siege of it in Central China, and thousands of the natives succumbed. One of the best-prepared and most intelligent medical missionaries contracted the disease and died shortly. It is practically impossible to hope to exterminate the disease in those countries, on account of the unsanitary conditions. England spends thousands every year trying to rid India and her possessions in Africa of the pest.

You remember that several years ago they had a few cases in San Francisco, but the disease was soon exterminated. I remember the officials paying three cents a head for all rats brought in. Several times since I have been in Porto Rico there have been cases in Caracas, Venezuela, S. A., but we never had much fear, as we thought the inspection rules were quite rigid. Just before it broke out in San Juan we had been reading the cables about the plague in Port-of-Spain, and Trinidad, and in Caracas. Just about that time, up came a ship-load of corn from Port-of-Spain, and it is thought that the rats that came with that load of corn brought the disease into Porto Rico, although this has been denied. No official statement has been made as to how the disease entered here, and probably none will be made. However, the first deaths were of men who worked around the docks, loading and unloading boats. A great many rats taken from the docks were found to be infected.

The rat seems to be the breeder of the disease, which is carried by the flea to the human being. I have always complained of the fleas down here. They are thick everywhere. It is impossible to go into the streets or into most of the houses without coming home to go flea hunting. We did not realize how many rats there were until the extermination began, and now it is known that Porto Rico is practically alive with rats. So the way to get rid of the bubonic plague is to exterminate the rat, and that is the work that is being done to-day, under official

order, in Porto Rico. Three expert sanitary men from Washington are here now, and the work of destroying old buildings, and rat-proofing all buildings is being carried forward with success. The bubonic plague in Porto Rico is costing our Government thousands of dollars.

The infection is from the flea bite. The disease develops in from 8 to 24 hours, and death results any time after 10 hours. Its first symptoms are severe headache, with high fever. The glands of the throat, followed by all glands of the body, begin to enlarge, and at once become enlarged sacs of pus. This stage is very much like glanders; in fact, there were two or three cases of glanders, just at the beginning, that are now quite generally thought to have been bubonic plague.

Of course, Porto Rico was totally unprepared for such a thing, and I might say, also, that the United States was, too. We had a very scant supply of disinfectants and no pest hospitals. The first supplies reached us in about four days after the first official announcement. Yersin's serum, with a very small amount of Haffkine's vaccine, came in the first supply, and these were freely used (by injection) in the affected districts. Yersin's, the first vaccine discovered for the disease, is not, to-day, considered a good prophylactic, as it is universally acknowledged that it protects the person to whom it is administered for but six days. A cable soon came from Washington, saying that plenty of Haffkine's vaccine (which protects the person for six months) had been purchased from Paris, and was then on the way to Porto Rico. At the time the first plague experts arrived from the States they brought quantities of tents, disinfectants, etc., for use in the extermination process. Yesterday's official statement said that everybody in Puerto de Tierra would be vaccinated at once as a preventive. Up to last night there were forty-one positive cases with twenty-seven deaths. There are a great many suspected cases in the Detention Hospital. The disease is not carried from person to person, except as the flea carries it.

Every one has been amazed at the way the disease has been controlled and the few deaths that have resulted. It can only be answered by the one statement,—thanks to the prompt and effective work of our Government. But for the fact that the Island is under the protection of the Stars and Stripes, thousands would have been dead by this time, and business completely paralyzed. Rats have been examined from all parts of the island, and infected ones found in only one town outside of the San Juan district. Of course, it will take a long, expensive time to rid the Island of the disease, as the fight must continue as long as there remains a rat in the infected districts, all at the expense of our Government.

ADELL MARTIN.